Here begins the book called Decameron,[1] *otherwise known as Prince Galahalt, wherein are contained a hundred stories, told in ten days by seven ladies and three young men.*

PROLOGUE

To take pity[2] on people in distress is a human quality which every man and woman should possess, but it is especially requisite in those who have once needed comfort, and found it in others. I number myself as one of these, because if ever anyone required or appreciated comfort, or indeed derived pleasure therefrom, I was that person. For from my earliest youth until the present day, I have been inflamed beyond measure with a most lofty and noble love,[3] far loftier and nobler than might perhaps be thought proper, were I to describe it, in a person of my humble condition. And although people of good judgement, to whose notice it had come, praised me for it and rated me much higher in their esteem, nevertheless it was exceedingly difficult for me to endure. The reason, I hasten to add, was not the cruelty of my lady-love, but the immoderate passion engendered within my mind by a craving that was ill-restrained. This, since it would allow me no proper respite, often caused me an inordinate amount of distress. But in my anguish I have on occasion derived much relief from the agreeable conversation and the admirable expressions of sympathy offered by friends, without which I am firmly convinced that I should have perished. However, the One who is infinite decreed by immutable law that all earthly things should come to an end. And it pleased Him that this love of mine, whose warmth exceeded all others, and which had stood firm and unyielding against all the pressures of good intention, helpful advice, and the risk of danger and open scandal, should in the course of time diminish of its own accord. So that now, all that is left of it in my mind is the delectable feeling which Love habitually reserves for those who refrain from venturing too far upon its deepest waters. And thus what was once a source of pain has now become, having shed all discomfort, an abiding sensation of pleasure.

But though the pain has ceased, I still preserve a clear recollection of the kindnesses I received in the past from people who, prompted by feelings of goodwill towards me, showed a concern for my sufferings. This memory will never, I think, fade for as long as I live. And since it is my conviction that gratitude, of all the virtues, is most highly to be commended and its opposite condemned, I have resolved, in order not to appear ungrateful, to employ what modest talents I possess in making restitution for what I have received. Thus, now that I can claim to have achieved my freedom, I intend to offer some solace, if not to those who assisted me (since their good sense or good fortune will perhaps render such a gift superfluous), at least to those who stand in need of it. And even though my support, or if you prefer, my encouragement, may seem very slight (as indeed it is) to the people concerned, I feel none the less that it should for preference be directed where it seems to be most needed, because that is the quarter in which it will be more effective and, at the same time, more readily welcomed.

And who will deny that such encouragement, however small, should much rather be offered to the charming ladies than to the men? For the ladies, out of fear or shame, conceal the flames of passion within their fragile breasts, and a hidden love is far more potent than one which is worn on the sleeve, as everyone knows who has had experience of these matters. Moreover they are forced to follow the whims, fancies and dictates of their fathers, mothers, brothers and husbands, so that they spend most of their time cooped up within the narrow confines of their rooms, where they sit in apparent idleness, wishing one thing and at the same time wishing its opposite, and reflecting on various matters, which cannot possibly always be pleasant to contemplate. And if, in the course of their meditations, their minds should be invaded by melancholy arising out of the flames of longing, it will inevitably take root there and make them suffer greatly, unless it be dislodged by new interests. Besides which, their powers of endurance are considerably weaker than those that men possess.

When men are in love, they are not affected in this way, as we can see quite plainly. They, whenever they are weighed down by melancholy or ponderous thoughts, have many ways of relieving or

expelling them. For if they wish, they can always walk abroad, see and hear many things, go fowling, hunting, fishing, riding and gambling, or attend to their business affairs. Each of these pursuits has the power of engaging men's minds, either wholly or in part, and diverting them from their gloomy meditations, at least for a certain period: after which, some form of consolation will ensue, or the affliction will grow less intense.

So in order that I may to some extent repair the omissions of Fortune, which (as we may see in the case of the more delicate sex) was always more sparing of support wherever natural strength was more deficient, I intend to provide succour and diversion for the ladies, but only for those who are in love, since the others can make do with their needles, their reels and their spindles. I shall narrate a hundred stories or fables or parables or histories[4] or whatever you choose to call them, recited in ten days by a worthy band of seven ladies and three young men, who assembled together during the plague which recently took such heavy toll of life. And I shall also include some songs, which these seven ladies sang for their mutual amusement.

In these tales will be found a variety of love adventures, bitter as well as pleasing, and other exciting incidents, which took place in both ancient and modern times. In reading them, the aforesaid ladies will be able to derive, not only pleasure from the entertaining matters therein set forth, but also some useful advice. For they will learn to recognize what should be avoided and likewise what should be pursued, and these things can only lead, in my opinion, to the removal of their affliction. If this should happen (and may God grant that it should), let them give thanks to Love, which, in freeing me from its bonds, has granted me the power of making provision for their pleasures.

FIRST DAY

Here begins the First Day of the Decameron, *wherein first of all the author explains the circumstances in which certain persons, who presently make their appearance, were induced to meet for the purpose of conversing together, after which, under the rule of* Pampinea, *each of them speaks on the subject they find most congenial.*

Whenever, fairest ladies, I pause to consider how compassionate you all are by nature, I invariably become aware that the present work will seem to you to possess an irksome and ponderous opening. For it carries at its head the painful memory of the deadly havoc wrought by the recent plague, which brought so much heartache and misery to those who witnessed, or had experience of it. But I do not want you to be deterred, for this reason, from reading any further, on the assumption that you are to be subjected, as you read, to an endless torrent of tears and sobbing. You will be affected no differently by this grim beginning than walkers confronted by a steep and rugged hill, beyond which there lies a beautiful and delectable plain. The degree of pleasure they derive from the latter will correspond directly to the difficulty of the climb and the descent. And just as the end of mirth is heaviness,[1] so sorrows are dispersed by the advent of joy.

This brief unpleasantness (I call it brief, inasmuch as it is contained within few words) is quickly followed by the sweetness and the pleasure which I have already promised you, and which, unless you were told in advance, you would not perhaps be expecting to find after such a beginning as this. Believe me, if I could decently have taken you whither I desire by some other route, rather than along a path so difficult as this, I would gladly have done so. But since it is impossible without this memoir to show the origin of the events you will read about later, I really have no alternative but to address myself to its composition.

I say, then, that the sum of thirteen hundred and forty-eight years had elapsed since the fruitful Incarnation of the Son of God, when the noble city of Florence, which for its great beauty excels all others in Italy, was visited by the deadly pestilence.[2] Some say that it descended upon the human race through the influence of the heavenly bodies, others that it was a punishment signifying God's righteous anger at our iniquitous way of life. But whatever its cause, it had originated some years earlier in the East, where it had claimed countless lives before it unhappily spread westward, growing in strength as it swept relentlessly on from one place to the next.

In the face of its onrush, all the wisdom and ingenuity of man were unavailing. Large quantities of refuse were cleared out of the city by officials specially appointed for the purpose, all sick persons were forbidden entry, and numerous instructions were issued for safeguarding the people's health, but all to no avail. Nor were the countless petitions humbly directed to God by the pious, whether by means of formal processions or in all other ways, any less ineffectual. For in the early spring of the year we have mentioned, the plague began, in a terrifying and extraordinary manner, to make its disastrous effects apparent. It did not take the form it had assumed in the East, where if anyone bled from the nose it was an obvious portent of certain death. On the contrary, its earliest symptom, in men and women alike, was the appearance of certain swellings in the groin or the armpit, some of which were egg-shaped whilst others were roughly the size of the common apple. Sometimes the swellings were large, sometimes not so large, and they were referred to by the populace as *gavòccioli*. From the two areas already mentioned, this deadly *gavòcciolo* would begin to spread, and within a short time it would appear at random all over the body. Later on, the symptoms of the disease changed, and many people began to find dark blotches and bruises on their arms, thighs, and other parts of the body, sometimes large and few in number, at other times tiny and closely spaced. These, to anyone unfortunate enough to contract them, were just as infallible a sign that he would die as the *gavòcciolo* had been earlier, and as indeed it still was.

Against these maladies, it seemed that all the advice of physicians and all the power of medicine were profitless and unavailing.

Perhaps the nature of the illness was such that it allowed no remedy: or perhaps those people who were treating the illness (whose numbers had increased enormously because the ranks of the qualified were invaded by people, both men and women, who had never received any training in medicine), being ignorant of its causes, were not prescribing the appropriate cure. At all events, few of those who caught it ever recovered, and in most cases death occurred within three days from the appearance of the symptoms we have described, some people dying more rapidly than others, the majority without any fever or other complications.

But what made this pestilence even more severe was that whenever those suffering from it mixed with people who were still unaffected, it would rush upon these with the speed of a fire racing through dry or oily substances that happened to come within its reach. Nor was this the full extent of its evil, for not only did it infect healthy persons who conversed or had any dealings with the sick, making them ill or visiting an equally horrible death upon them, but it also seemed to transfer the sickness to anyone touching the clothes or other objects which had been handled or used by its victims.

It is a remarkable story that I have to relate. And were it not for the fact that I am one of many people who saw it with their own eyes, I would scarcely dare to believe it, let alone commit it to paper, even though I had heard it from a person whose word I could trust. The plague I have been describing was of so contagious a nature that very often it visibly did more than simply pass from one person to another. In other words, whenever an animal other than a human being touched anything belonging to a person who had been stricken or exterminated by the disease, it not only caught the sickness, but died from it almost at once. To all of this, as I have just said, my own eyes bore witness on more than one occasion. One day, for instance, the rags of a pauper who had died from the disease were thrown into the street, where they attracted the attention of two pigs. In their wonted fashion, the pigs first of all gave the rags a thorough mauling with their snouts, after which they took them between their teeth and shook them against their cheeks. And within a short time they began to writhe as though they had

been poisoned, then they both dropped dead to the ground, spread-eagled upon the rags that had brought about their undoing.

These things, and many others of a similar or even worse nature, caused various fears and fantasies to take root in the minds of those who were still alive and well. And almost without exception, they took a single and very inhuman precaution, namely to avoid or run away from the sick and their belongings, by which means they all thought that their own health would be preserved.

Some people were of the opinion that a sober and abstemious mode of living considerably reduced the risk of infection. They therefore formed themselves into groups and lived in isolation from everyone else. Having withdrawn to a comfortable abode where there were no sick persons, they locked themselves in and settled down to a peaceable existence, consuming modest quantities of delicate foods and precious wines and avoiding all excesses. They refrained from speaking to outsiders, refused to receive news of the dead or the sick, and entertained themselves with music and whatever other amusements they were able to devise.

Others took the opposite view, and maintained that an infallible way of warding off this appalling evil was to drink heavily, enjoy life to the full, go round singing and merrymaking, gratify all of one's cravings whenever the opportunity offered, and shrug the whole thing off as one enormous joke. Moreover, they practised what they preached to the best of their ability, for they would visit one tavern after another, drinking all day and night to immoderate excess; or alternatively (and this was their more frequent custom), they would do their drinking in various private houses, but only in the ones where the conversation was restricted to subjects that were pleasant or entertaining. Such places were easy to find, for people behaved as though their days were numbered, and treated their belongings and their own persons with equal abandon. Hence most houses had become common property, and any passing stranger could make himself at home as naturally as though he were the rightful owner. But for all their riotous manner of living, these people always took good care to avoid any contact with the sick.

In the face of so much affliction and misery, all respect for the laws of God and man had virtually broken down and been

extinguished in our city. For like everybody else, those ministers and executors of the laws who were not either dead or ill were left with so few subordinates that they were unable to discharge any of their duties. Hence everyone was free to behave as he pleased.

There were many other people who steered a middle course between the two already mentioned, neither restricting their diet to the same degree as the first group, nor indulging so freely as the second in drinking and other forms of wantonness, but simply doing no more than satisfy their appetite. Instead of incarcerating themselves, these people moved about freely, holding in their hands a posy of flowers, or fragrant herbs, or one of a wide range of spices, which they applied at frequent intervals to their nostrils, thinking it an excellent idea to fortify the brain with smells of that particular sort; for the stench of dead bodies, sickness, and medicines seemed to fill and pollute the whole of the atmosphere.

Some people, pursuing what was possibly the safer alternative, callously maintained that there was no better or more efficacious remedy against a plague than to run away from it. Swayed by this argument, and sparing no thought for anyone but themselves, large numbers of men and women abandoned their city, their homes, their relatives, their estates and their belongings, and headed for the countryside, either in Florentine territory or, better still, abroad. It was as though they imagined that the wrath of God would not unleash this plague against men for their iniquities irrespective of where they happened to be, but would only be aroused against those who found themselves within the city walls; or possibly they assumed that the whole of the population would be exterminated and that the city's last hour had come.

Of the people who held these various opinions, not all of them died. Nor, however, did they all survive. On the contrary, many of each different persuasion fell ill here, there, and everywhere, and having themselves, when they were fit and well, set an example to those who were as yet unaffected, they languished away with virtually no one to nurse them. It was not merely a question of one citizen avoiding another, and of people almost invariably neglecting their neighbours and rarely or never visiting their relatives, addressing them only from a distance; this scourge had implanted so great

a terror in the hearts of men and women that brothers abandoned brothers, uncles their nephews, sisters their brothers, and in many cases wives deserted their husbands. But even worse, and almost incredible, was the fact that fathers and mothers refused to nurse and assist their own children, as though they did not belong to them.

Hence the countless numbers of people who fell ill, both male and female, were entirely dependent upon either the charity of friends (who were few and far between) or the greed of servants, who remained in short supply despite the attraction of high wages out of all proportion to the services they performed. Furthermore, these latter were men and women of coarse intellect and the majority were unused to such duties, and they did little more than hand things to the invalid when asked to do so and watch over him when he was dying. And in performing this kind of service, they frequently lost their lives as well as their earnings.

As a result of this wholesale desertion of the sick by neighbours, relatives and friends, and in view of the scarcity of servants, there grew up a practice almost never previously heard of, whereby when a woman fell ill, no matter how gracious or beautiful or gently bred she might be, she raised no objection to being attended by a male servant, whether he was young or not. Nor did she have any scruples about showing him every part of her body as freely as she would have displayed it to a woman, provided that the nature of her infirmity required her to do so; and this explains why those women who recovered were possibly less chaste in the period that followed.

Moreover a great many people died who would perhaps have survived had they received some assistance. And hence, what with the lack of appropriate means for tending the sick, and the virulence of the plague, the number of deaths reported in the city whether by day or by night was so enormous that it astonished all who heard tell of it, to say nothing of the people who actually witnessed the carnage. And it was perhaps inevitable that among the citizens who survived there arose certain customs that were quite contrary to established tradition.

It had once been customary, as it is again nowadays, for the

women relatives and neighbours of a dead man to assemble in his house in order to mourn in the company of the women who had been closest to him; moreover his kinsfolk would forgather in front of his house along with his neighbours and various other citizens, and there would be a contingent of priests, whose numbers varied according to the quality of the deceased; his body would be taken thence to the church in which he had wanted to be buried, being borne on the shoulders of his peers amidst the funeral pomp of candles and dirges. But as the ferocity of the plague began to mount, this practice all but disappeared entirely and was replaced by different customs. For not only did people die without having many women about them, but a great number departed this life without anyone at all to witness their going. Few indeed were those to whom the lamentations and bitter tears of their relatives were accorded; on the contrary, more often than not bereavement was the signal for laughter and witticisms and general jollification – the art of which the women, having for the most part suppressed their feminine concern for the salvation of the souls of the dead, had learned to perfection. Moreover it was rare for the bodies of the dead to be accompanied by more than ten or twelve neighbours to the church, nor were they borne on the shoulders of worthy and honest citizens, but by a kind of gravedigging fraternity, newly come into being and drawn from the lower orders of society. These people assumed the title of sexton, and demanded a fat fee for their services, which consisted in taking up the coffin and hauling it swiftly away, not to the church specified by the dead man in his will, but usually to the nearest at hand. They would be preceded by a group of four or six clerics, who between them carried one or two candles at most, and sometimes none at all. Nor did the priests go to the trouble of pronouncing solemn and lengthy funeral rites, but, with the aid of these so-called sextons, they hastily lowered the body into the nearest empty grave they could find.

As for the common people and a large proportion of the bourgeoisie, they presented a much more pathetic spectacle, for the majority of them were constrained, either by their poverty or the hope of survival, to remain in their houses. Being confined to their own parts of the city, they fell ill daily in their thousands, and since they

had no one to assist them or attend to their needs, they inevitably perished almost without exception. Many dropped dead in the open streets, both by day and by night, whilst a great many others, though dying in their own houses, drew their neighbours' attention to the fact more by the smell of their rotting corpses than by any other means. And what with these, and the others who were dying all over the city, bodies were here, there and everywhere.

Whenever people died, their neighbours nearly always followed a single, set routine, prompted as much by their fear of being contaminated by the decaying corpse as by any charitable feelings they may have entertained towards the deceased. Either on their own, or with the assistance of bearers whenever these were to be had, they extracted the bodies of the dead from their houses and left them lying outside their front doors, where anyone going about the streets, especially in the early morning, could have observed countless numbers of them. Funeral biers would then be sent for, upon which the dead were taken away, though there were some who, for lack of biers, were carried off on plain boards. It was by no means rare for more than one of these biers to be seen with two or three bodies upon it at a time; on the contrary, many were seen to contain a husband and wife, two or three brothers and sisters, a father and son, or some other pair of close relatives. And times without number it happened that two priests would be on their way to bury someone, holding a cross before them, only to find that bearers carrying three or four additional biers would fall in behind them; so that whereas the priests had thought they had only one burial to attend to, they in fact had six or seven, and sometimes more. Even in these circumstances, however, there were no tears or candles or mourners to honour the dead; in fact, no more respect was accorded to dead people than would nowadays be shown towards dead goats. For it was quite apparent that the one thing which, in normal times, no wise man had ever learned to accept with patient resignation (even though it struck so seldom and unobtrusively), had now been brought home to the feeble-minded as well, but the scale of the calamity caused them to regard it with indifference.

Such was the multitude of corpses (of which further consignments

were arriving every day and almost by the hour at each of the churches), that there was not sufficient consecrated ground for them to be buried in, especially if each was to have its own plot in accordance with long-established custom. So when all the graves were full, huge trenches were excavated in the churchyards, into which new arrivals were placed in their hundreds, stowed tier upon tier like ships' cargo, each layer of corpses being covered over with a thin layer of soil till the trench was filled to the top.

But rather than describe in elaborate detail the calamities we experienced in the city at that time, I must mention that, whilst an ill wind was blowing through Florence itself, the surrounding region was no less badly affected. In the fortified towns, conditions were similar to those in the city itself on a minor scale; but in the scattered hamlets and the countryside proper, the poor unfortunate peasants and their families had no physicians or servants whatever to assist them, and collapsed by the wayside, in their fields, and in their cottages at all hours of the day and night, dying more like animals than human beings. Like the townspeople, they too grew apathetic in their ways, disregarded their affairs, and neglected their possessions. Moreover they all behaved as though each day was to be their last, and far from making provision for the future by tilling their lands, tending their flocks, and adding to their previous labours, they tried in every way they could think of to squander the assets already in their possession. Thus it came about that oxen, asses, sheep, goats, pigs, chickens, and even dogs (for all their deep fidelity to man) were driven away and allowed to roam freely through the fields, where the crops lay abandoned and had not even been reaped, let alone gathered in. And after a whole day's feasting, many of these animals, as though possessing the power of reason, would return glutted in the evening to their own quarters, without any shepherd to guide them.

But let us leave the countryside and return to the city. What more remains to be said, except that the cruelty of heaven (and possibly, in some measure, also that of man) was so immense and so devastating that between March and July of the year in question, what with the fury of the pestilence and the fact that so many of the sick were inadequately cared for or abandoned in their hour of need

because the healthy were too terrified to approach them, it is reliably thought that over a hundred thousand human lives were extinguished within the walls of the city of Florence? Yet before this lethal catastrophe fell upon the city, it is doubtful whether anyone would have guessed it contained so many inhabitants.

Ah, how great a number of splendid palaces, fine houses, and noble dwellings, once filled with retainers, with lords and with ladies, were bereft of all who had lived there, down to the tiniest child! How numerous were the famous families, the vast estates, the notable fortunes, that were seen to be left without a rightful successor! How many gallant gentlemen, fair ladies, and sprightly youths, who would have been judged hale and hearty by Galen, Hippocrates and Aesculapius[3] (to say nothing of others), having breakfasted in the morning with their kinsfolk, acquaintances and friends, supped that same evening with their ancestors in the next world!

The more I reflect upon all this misery, the deeper my sense of personal sorrow; hence I shall refrain from describing those aspects which can suitably be omitted, and proceed to inform you that these were the conditions prevailing in our city, which was by now almost emptied of its inhabitants, when one Tuesday morning (or so I was told by a person whose word can be trusted) seven young ladies[4] were to be found in the venerable church of Santa Maria Novella,[5] which was otherwise almost deserted. They had been attending divine service, and were dressed in mournful attire appropriate to the times. Each was a friend, a neighbour, or a relative of the other six, none was older than twenty-seven or younger than eighteen, and all were intelligent, gently bred, fair to look upon, graceful in bearing, and charmingly unaffected. I could tell you their actual names, but refrain from doing so for a good reason, namely that I would not want any of them to feel embarrassed, at any time in the future, on account of the ensuing stories, all of which they either listened to or narrated themselves. For nowadays, laws relating to pleasure are somewhat restrictive, whereas at that time, for the reasons indicated above, they were exceptionally lax, not only for ladies of their own age but also for much older women. Besides, I have no wish to supply envious tongues, ever ready to censure a laudable way of life, with a chance to besmirch

the good name of these worthy ladies with their lewd and filthy gossip. And therefore, so that we may perceive distinctly what each of them had to say, I propose to refer to them by names which are either wholly or partially appropriate to the qualities of each. The first of them, who was also the eldest, we shall call Pampinea, the second Fiammetta, Filomena the third, and the fourth Emilia; then we shall name the fifth Lauretta, and the sixth Neifile, whilst to the last, not without reason, we shall give the name of Elissa.

Without prior agreement but simply by chance, these seven ladies found themselves sitting, more or less in a circle, in one part of the church, reciting their paternosters. Eventually, they left off and heaved a great many sighs, after which they began to talk among themselves on various different aspects of the times through which they were passing. But after a little while, they all fell silent except for Pampinea, who said:

'Dear ladies, you will often have heard it affirmed, as I have, that no man does injury to another in exercising his lawful rights. Every person born into this world has a natural right to sustain, preserve, and defend his own life to the best of his ability – a right so freely acknowledged that men have sometimes killed others in self-defence, and no blame whatever has attached to their actions. Now, if this is permitted by the laws, upon whose prompt application all mortal creatures depend for their well-being, how can it possibly be wrong, seeing that it harms no one, for us or anyone else to do all in our power to preserve our lives? If I pause to consider what we have been doing this morning, and what we have done on several mornings in the past, if I reflect on the nature and subject of our conversation, I realize, just as you also must realize, that each of us is apprehensive on her own account. This does not surprise me in the least, but what does greatly surprise me (seeing that each of us has the natural feelings of a woman) is that we do nothing to requite ourselves against the thing of which we are all so justly afraid.

'Here we linger for no other purpose, or so it seems to me, than to count the number of corpses being taken to burial, or to hear whether the friars of the church, very few of whom are left, chant their offices at the appropriate hours, or to exhibit the quality and

quantity of our sorrows, by means of the clothes we are wearing, to all those whom we meet in this place. And if we go outside, we shall see the dead and the sick being carried hither and thither, or we shall see people, once condemned to exile by the courts for their misdeeds, careering wildly about the streets in open defiance of the law, well knowing that those appointed to enforce it are either dead or dying; or else we shall find ourselves at the mercy of the scum of our city who, having scented our blood, call themselves sextons and go prancing and bustling all over the place, singing bawdy songs that add insult to our injuries. Moreover, all we ever hear is "So-and-so's dead" and "So-and-so's dying"; and if there were anyone left to mourn, the whole place would be filled with sounds of weeping and wailing.

'And if we return to our homes, what happens? I know not whether your own experience is similar to mine, but my house was once full of servants, and now that there is no one left apart from my maid and myself, I am filled with foreboding and feel as if every hair of my head is standing on end. Wherever I go in the house, wherever I pause to rest, I seem to be haunted by the shades of the departed, whose faces no longer appear as I remember them but with strange and horribly twisted expressions that frighten me out of my senses.

'Accordingly, whether I am here in church or out in the streets or sitting at home, I always feel ill at ease, the more so because it seems to me that no one possessing private means and a place to retreat to is left here apart from ourselves. But even if such people are still to be found, they draw no distinction, as I have frequently heard and seen for myself, between what is honest and what is dishonest; and provided only that they are prompted by their appetites, they will do whatever affords them the greatest pleasure, whether by day or by night, alone or in company. It is not only of lay people that I speak, but also of those enclosed in monasteries, who, having convinced themselves that such behaviour is suitable for them and is only unbecoming in others, have broken the rules of obedience and given themselves over to carnal pleasures, thereby thinking to escape, and have turned lascivious and dissolute.

'If this be so (and we plainly perceive that it is), what are we

doing here? What are we waiting for? What are we dreaming about? Why do we lag so far behind all the rest of the citizens in providing for our safety? Do we rate ourselves lower than all other women? Or do we suppose that our own lives, unlike those of others, are bound to our bodies by such strong chains that we may ignore all those things which have the power to harm them? In that case we are deluded and mistaken. We have only to recall the names and the condition of the young men and women who have fallen victim to this cruel pestilence, in order to realize clearly the foolishness of such notions.

'And so, lest by pretending to be above such things or by becoming complacent we should succumb to that which we might possibly avoid if we so desired, I would think it an excellent idea (though I do not know whether you would agree with me) for us all to get away from this city, just as many others have done before us, and as indeed they are doing still. We could go and stay together on one of our various country estates, shunning at all costs the lewd practices of our fellow citizens and feasting and merrymaking as best we may without in any way overstepping the bounds of what is reasonable.

'There we shall hear the birds singing, we shall see fresh green hills and plains, fields of corn undulating like the sea, and trees of at least a thousand different species; and we shall have a clearer view of the heavens, which, troubled though they are, do not however deny us their eternal beauties, so much more fair to look upon than the desolate walls of our city. Moreover the country air is much more refreshing, the necessities of life in such a time as this are more abundant, and there are fewer obstacles to contend with. For although the farmworkers are dying there in the same way as the townspeople here in Florence, the spectacle is less harrowing inasmuch as the houses and people are more widely scattered. Besides, unless I am mistaken we shall not be abandoning anyone by going away from here; on the contrary, we may fairly claim that we are the ones who have been abandoned, for our kinsfolk are either dead or fled, and have left us to fend for ourselves in the midst of all this affliction, as though disowning us completely.

'Hence no one can reproach us for taking the course I have

advocated, whereas if we do nothing we shall inevitably be confronted with distress and mourning, and possibly forfeit our lives into the bargain. Let us therefore do as I suggest, taking our maidservants with us and seeing to the dispatch of all the things we shall need. We can move from place to place, spending one day here and another there, pursuing whatever pleasures and entertainments the present times will afford. In this way of life we shall continue until such time as we discover (provided we are spared from early death) the end decreed by Heaven for these terrible events. You must remember, after all, that it is no more unseemly for us to go away and thus preserve our own honour than it is for most other women to remain here and forfeit theirs.'

Having listened to Pampinea's suggestion, the other ladies not only applauded it but were so eager to carry it into effect that they had already begun to work out the details amongst themselves, as though they wanted to rise from their pews and set off without further ado. But Filomena, being more prudent than the others, said:

'Pampinea's arguments, ladies, are most convincing, but we should not follow her advice as hastily as you appear to wish. You must remember that we are all women, and every one of us is sufficiently adult to acknowledge that women, when left to themselves, are not the most rational of creatures, and that without the supervision of some man or other their capacity for getting things done is somewhat restricted. We are fickle, quarrelsome, suspicious, cowardly, and easily frightened; and hence I greatly fear that if we have none but ourselves to guide us, our little band will break up much more swiftly, and with far less credit to ourselves, than would otherwise be the case. We would be well advised to resolve this problem before we depart.'

Then Elissa said:

'It is certainly true that man is the head of woman,[6] and that without a man to guide us it rarely happens that any enterprise of ours is brought to a worthy conclusion. But where are we to find these men? As we all know, most of our own menfolk are dead, and those few that are still alive are fleeing in scattered little groups from that which we too are intent upon avoiding. Yet we cannot

very well go away with total strangers, for if self-preservation is our aim, we must so arrange our affairs that wherever we go for our pleasure and repose, no trouble or scandal should come of it.'

Whilst the talk of the ladies was proceeding along these lines, there came into the church three young men,[7] in whom neither the horrors of the times nor the loss of friends or relatives nor concern for their own safety had dampened the flames of love, much less extinguished them completely. I have called them young, but none in fact was less than twenty-five years of age, and the first was called Panfilo, the second Filostrato, and the last Dioneo. Each of them was most agreeable and gently bred, and by way of sweetest solace amid all this turmoil they were seeking to catch a glimpse of their lady-loves, all three of whom, as it happened, were among the seven we have mentioned, whilst some of the remaining four were closely related to one or other of the three. No sooner did they espy the young ladies than they too were espied, whereupon Pampinea smiled and said:

'See how Fortune favours us right from the beginning, in setting before us three young men of courage and intelligence, who will readily act as our guides and servants if we are not too proud to accept them for such duties.'

Then Neifile, whose face had turned all scarlet with confusion since she was the object of one of the youth's affections, said:

'For goodness' sake do take care, Pampinea, of what you are saying! To my certain knowledge, nothing but good can be said of any one of them, and I consider them more than competent to fulfil the office of which we were speaking. I also think they would be good, honest company, not only for us, but for ladies much finer and fairer than ourselves. But since it is perfectly obvious that they are in love with certain of the ladies here present, I am apprehensive lest, by taking them with us, through no fault either of theirs or of our own, we should bring disgrace and censure on ourselves.'

'That is quite beside the point,' said Filomena. 'If I live honestly and my conscience is clear, then people may say whatever they like; God and Truth will take up arms in my defence. Now, if only they were prepared to accompany us, we should truly be able to claim, as Pampinea has said, that Fortune favours our enterprise.'

Filomena's words reassured the other ladies, who not only withdrew their objections but unanimously agreed to call the young men over, explain their intentions, and inquire whether they would be willing to join their expedition. And so, without any further discussion, Pampinea, who was a blood relation to one of the young men, got up and walked towards them. They were standing there gazing at the young ladies, and Pampinea, having offered them a cheerful greeting, told them what they were planning to do, and asked them on behalf of all her companions whether they would be prepared to join them in a spirit of chaste and brotherly affection.

The young men thought at first that she was making mock of them, but when they realized she was speaking in earnest, they gladly agreed to place themselves at the young ladies' disposal. So that there should be no delay in putting the plan into effect, they made provision there and then for the various matters that would have to be attended to before their departure. Meticulous care was taken to see that all necessary preparations were put in hand, supplies were sent on in advance to the place at which they intended to stay, and as dawn was breaking on the morning of the next day, which was a Wednesday, the ladies and the three young men, accompanied by one or two of the maids and all three manservants, set out from the city. And scarcely had they travelled two miles from Florence before they reached the place at which they had agreed to stay.

The spot in question[8] was some distance away from any road, on a small hill that was agreeable to behold for its abundance of shrubs and trees, all bedecked in green leaves. Perched on its summit was a palace, built round a fine, spacious courtyard, and containing loggias, halls, and sleeping apartments, which were not only excellently proportioned but richly embellished with paintings depicting scenes of gaiety. Delectable gardens and meadows lay all around, and there were wells of cool, refreshing water. The cellars were stocked with precious wines, more suited to the palates of connoisseurs than to sedate and respectable ladies. And on their arrival the company discovered, to their no small pleasure, that the place had been cleaned from top to bottom, the beds in the rooms were made up,

the whole house was adorned with seasonable flowers of every description, and the floors had been carpeted with rushes.

Soon after reaching the palace, they all sat down, and Dioneo, a youth of matchless charm and readiness of wit, said:

'It is not our foresight, ladies, but rather your own good sense, that has led us to this spot. I know not what you intend to do with your troubles; my own I left inside the city gates when I departed thence a short while ago in your company. Hence you may either prepare to join with me in as much laughter, song and merriment as your sense of decorum will allow, or else you may give me leave to go back for my troubles and live in the afflicted city.'

Pampinea, as though she too had driven away all her troubles, answered him in the same carefree vein.

'There is much sense in what you say, Dioneo,' she replied. 'A merry life should be our aim, since it was for no other reason that we were prompted to run away from the sorrows of the city. However, nothing will last for very long unless it possesses a definite form. And since it was I who led the discussions from which this fair company has come into being, I have given some thought to the continuance of our happiness, and consider it necessary for us to choose a leader, drawn from our own ranks, whom we would honour and obey as our superior, and whose sole concern will be that of devising the means whereby we may pass our time agreeably. But so that none of us will complain that he or she has had no opportunity to experience the burden of responsibility and the pleasure of command associated with sovereign power, I propose that the burden and the honour should be assigned to each of us in turn for a single day. It will be for all of us to decide who is to be our first ruler, after which it will be up to each ruler, when the hour of vespers approaches, to elect his or her successor from among the ladies and gentlemen present. The person chosen to govern will be at liberty to make whatever arrangements he likes for the period covered by his rule, and to prescribe the place and the manner in which we are to live.'

Pampinea's proposal was greatly to everyone's liking, and they unanimously elected her as their queen for the first day, whereupon Filomena quickly ran over to a laurel bush, for she had frequently

heard it said that laurel leaves were especially worthy of veneration and that they conferred great honour upon those people of merit who were crowned with them. Having plucked a few of its shoots, she fashioned them into a splendid and venerable garland, which she set upon Pampinea's brow, and which thenceforth became the outward symbol of sovereign power and authority to all the members of the company, for as long as they remained together.

Upon her election as their queen, Pampinea summoned the servants of the three young men to appear before her together with their own maidservants, who were four in number. And having called upon everyone to be silent, she said:

'So that I may begin by setting you all a good example, through which, proceeding from good to better, our company will be enabled to live an ordered and agreeable existence for as long as we choose to remain together, I first of all appoint Dioneo's manservant, Parmeno,[9] as my steward, and to him I commit the management and care of our household, together with all that appertains to the service of the hall. I desire that Panfilo's servant, Sirisco, should act as our buyer and treasurer, and carry out the instructions of Parmeno. As well as attending to the needs of Filostrato, Tindaro will look after the other two gentlemen in their rooms whenever their own manservants are prevented by their offices from performing such duties. My own maidservant, Misia, will be employed full-time in the kitchen along with Filomena's maidservant, Licisca, and they will prepare with diligence whatever dishes are prescribed by Parmeno. Chimera and Stratilia, the servants of Lauretta and Fiammetta, are required to act as chambermaids to all the ladies, as well as seeing that the places we frequent are neatly and tidily maintained. And unless they wish to incur our royal displeasure, we desire and command that each and every one of the servants should take good care, no matter what they should hear or observe in their comings and goings, to bring us no tidings of the world outside these walls unless they are tidings of happiness.'

Her orders thus summarily given, and commended by all her companions, she rose gaily to her feet, and said:

'There are gardens here, and meadows, and other places of great charm and beauty, through which we may now wander in search

of our amusement, each of us being free to do whatever he pleases. But on the stroke of tierce,[10] let us all return to this spot, so that we may breakfast together in the shade.'

The merry company having thus been dismissed by their newly elected queen, the young men and their fair companions sauntered slowly through a garden, conversing on pleasant topics, weaving fair garlands for each other from the leaves of various trees, and singing songs of love.

After spending as much time there as the queen had allotted them, they returned to the house to find that Parmeno had made a zealous beginning to his duties, for as they entered the hall on the ground floor, they saw the tables ready laid, with pure white tablecloths and with goblets shining bright as silver, whilst the whole room was decorated with broom blossom. At the queen's behest, they rinsed their hands in water, then seated themselves in the places to which Parmeno had assigned them.

Dishes, daintily prepared, were brought in, excellent wines were at hand, and without a sound the three manservants promptly began to wait upon them. Everyone was delighted that these things had been so charmingly and efficiently arranged, and during the meal there was pleasant talk and merry laughter from all sides. Afterwards, the tables were cleared, and the queen sent for musical instruments so that one or two of their number, well versed in music, could play and sing, whilst the rest, ladies and gentlemen alike, could dance a *carole*. At the queen's request, Dioneo took a lute and Fiammetta a viol, and they struck up a melodious tune, whereupon the queen, having sent the servants off to eat, formed a ring with the other ladies and the two young men, and sedately began to dance. And when the dance was over, they sang a number of gay and charming little songs.

In this fashion they continued until the queen decided that the time had come for them to retire to rest, whereupon she dismissed the whole company. The young men went away to their rooms, which were separated from those of the ladies, and found that, like the hall, they too were full of flowers, and that their beds were neatly made. The ladies made a similar discovery in theirs, and, having undressed, they lay down to rest.

The queen rose shortly after nones,[11] and caused the other ladies to be roused, as also the young men, declaring it was harmful to sleep too much during the day. They therefore betook themselves to a meadow, where the grass, being protected from the heat of the sun, grew thick and green, and where, perceiving that a gentle breeze was stirring, the queen suggested that they should all sit on the green grass in a circle. And when they were seated, she addressed them as follows:

'As you can see, the sun is high in the sky, it is very hot, and all is silent except for the cicadas in the olive-trees. For the moment, it would surely be foolish of us to venture abroad, this being such a cool and pleasant spot in which to linger. Besides, as you will observe, there are chessboards and other games here, and so we are free to amuse ourselves in whatever way we please. But if you were to follow my advice, this hotter part of the day would be spent, not in playing games (which inevitably bring anxiety to one of the players, without offering very much pleasure either to his opponent or to the spectators), but in telling stories – an activity that may afford some amusement both to the narrator and to the company at large. By the time each one of you has narrated a little tale of his own or her own, the sun will be setting, the heat will have abated, and we shall be able to go and amuse ourselves wherever you choose. Let us, then, if the idea appeals to you, carry this proposal of mine into effect. But I am willing to follow your own wishes in this matter, and if you disagree with my suggestion, let us all go and occupy our time in whatever way we please until the hour of vespers.'

The whole company, ladies and gentlemen alike, were in favour of telling stories.

'Then if it is agreeable to you,' said the queen, 'I desire that on this first day each of us should be free to speak upon whatever topic he prefers.'

And turning to Panfilo, who was seated on her right, she graciously asked him to introduce the proceedings with one of his stories. No sooner did he receive this invitation than Panfilo began as follows, with everyone listening intently:

NOTES

PROLOGUE

1. ***the book called Decameron*** Following a practice adopted in several of his earlier works, B. uses a pseudo-Greek title, meaning 'Ten Days', and by a typical ironic twist, he points up the contrast between his own collection of narratives and Saint Ambrose's series of erudite allegorical sermons on the six days of the Creation, the medieval devotional text known as the *Hexaemeron* (Six Days). B.'s subtitle (*Prince Galeotto*, or *Galahalt*) is no less equivocal, being derived from the character who before B.'s own transformation of the Greek Pandarus in his narrative poem, *Filostrato*, was the archetypal go-between of medieval romance.

2. ***To take pity*** In accordance with one of the rules of medieval rhetoric, '*opus illustrant proverbia*' ('proverbs illustrate the work'), B. opens his book with a proverbial saying.

3. ***a most noble and lofty love*** Until well into the present century, this was interpreted by B.'s biographers as a reference to Maria d'Aquino, natural daughter of the Angevin ruler of Naples, King Robert, with whom the author was supposed, because of a series of cryptic references in several of his earlier works, to have had an amorous liaison. There is no clear evidence that such a lady ever existed, and it is now generally accepted that in claiming to have loved a woman of royal birth, B. was simply following a well-established precept of medieval Love theorists, in particular Andreas Capellanus.

4. ***a hundred stories or fables or parables or histories*** The Italian reads '*cento favole o parabole o istorie*', a phrase that happens to summarize the known sources of many of the *Decameron*'s stories: French *fabliaux*, Latin *exempla* and Italian historical chronicles. See Translator's Introduction, p.lviii.

FIRST DAY

(Introduction)

1. ***the end of mirth is heaviness*** B. is quoting from Proverbs xiv, 13: 'Even in laughter the heart is sorrowful; and the end of that mirth is heaviness.' But the whole of this opening paragraph, with its references to 'an irksome and ponderous opening', 'this grim beginning', and the

'steep and rugged hill, beyond which there lies a beautiful and delectable plain', signals the author's intention to write a work conforming to the rules of a particular literary genre. Dante's visionary journey from the sorrows of Hell to the joys of Paradise had been chronicled in his great epic poem, the *Commedia*. Italian commentators often refer to B.'s work as the Human Comedy, the secular counterpart to Dante's *Divine Comedy*. But the distinction is misleading, implying as it does that Dante's concern with the secular world is less evident, which is patently absurd.

2. ***the deadly pestilence*** Nowadays known in Northern Europe as the Black Death, the plague of 1347 to 1351 is thought to have reduced the total population by one third, causing enormous damage to established social institutions. B.'s famous description of its ruinous effects in Florence in 1348, graphic and convincing though it may appear, is not to be read as the eyewitness account he claims it to be. It is in fact based upon earlier plague descriptions, in particular the one found in the eighth-century *Historia Langobardorum* by Paulus Diaconus ('Paul the Deacon'). Confirmation that it should be read as a literary artefact is found in its concluding paragraph ('Ah, how great a number of splendid palaces,' etc., p. 13), where the writing is heavily loaded with rhetorical devices such as anaphora and a variant of the *ubi sunt* motif of classical literature.

3. ***Galen, Hippocrates and Aesculapius*** Galen (AD 129–199) was the founder of experimental physiology, whilst Hippocrates (*c.* 460–*c.* 377 BC) is traditionally regarded as the father of medicine. Aesculapius (or Asclepius), on the other hand, was a mythical figure, the Graeco-Roman god of medicine. It was common for the three names to be linked by medieval writers whenever medical authority required to be invoked.

4. ***seven young ladies*** The occult significance of numbers, a regular feature of medieval literature, is much in evidence in the *Decameron*. The seven ladies are clearly symbolic, if only because none is married yet all are older than the normal marriageable age of between fourteen and seventeen. The range of their ages ('none was older than twenty-seven or younger than eighteen') is itself significant, both limits being multiples of nine, the so-called golden number. Their unswerving propriety, to which B. refers at regular intervals, makes it probable that he intended the female members of his group of storytellers to represent the four cardinal virtues (Prudence, Justice, Temperance, Fortitude) and the three theological virtues (Faith, Hope, Love).

5. ***Santa Maria Novella*** The scene for the beginning of the frame story (in preference, say, to a more centrally located church such as the Florentine

cathedral, or Duomo) was probably selected because of the association of its name with the telling of a story, or *novella*.

6. ***man is the head of woman*** See Ephesians (v, 23): 'For the husband is the head of the wife.' It has become fashionable in recent years to think of B. as a feminist writer *ante litteram*. At times, however, passages like these suggest that he was no more feminist than Saint Paul.

7. ***three young men*** No less symbolic numerically than the seven young ladies, whom they complement to make up the perfect number of ten, the three young men possibly represent the tripartite division of the soul into Reason (Panfilo), Anger (Filostrato) and Lust (Dioneo).

8. ***the spot in question*** On the basis of the details supplied by the writer, scholars have attempted to identify the exact location of the first of the storytellers' country retreats. But the place is imaginary. The seemingly realistic description conceals B.'s expert handling of the literary topos known as the *locus amœnus*. Other, more elaborate examples are seen in the Introduction to the Third Day and the Conclusion of the Sixth Day.

9. ***Dioneo's manservant, Parmeno*** By giving the seven servants names that are associated with the lower social orders in classical literature, more especially in the Hellenistic comedies of Terence and Plautus, B. further heightens the sense of distance separating the world of the frame from that of the narratives.

10. ***on the stroke of tierce*** Medieval writers generally use one of the canonical hours, such as Matins, Tierce (or Terce), Sext, Nones, Vespers and Compline, to indicate the time of day. Tierce is recited at the third hour after sunrise. At the equinox it corresponds roughly to 9.00 a.m.

11. ***shortly after nones*** Nones is the canonical office recited at the ninth hour of the day, about 3.00 p.m.